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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 002759

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SUBJECT: PRT DIYALA: PROTESTS IN KURDISH AREA AMID CALLS FOR PULLBACK BY IRAQI FORCES

Classified By: PRT Leader George White. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (U) This is a PRT Diyala reporting cable.

¶2. (C) SUMMARY. Demonstrators at Khanaqin, a Kurdish majority city on the Iranian border, protested August 26, against the possible deployment of Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) elements near the city as part of "Operation Benevolent Diyala." Kurdish political leaders addressed the demonstrators, calling for the immediate withdrawal of ISF troops in the vicinity and insisting that Khanaqin does not contain any Al Qaeda or other terrorist cells. (Note: ISF elements reportedly had set up checkpoints outside the city but not in Khanaqin proper.) Diyala Provincial Council Chairman argued the ISF presence near Khanaqin was politically motivated, violated the Iraqi constitution and would detract from security rather than enhance it. The provincial official did not expect violence, but warned that tensions were rising rapidly. He expressed concern that the departure of a Peshmerga brigade and other recent developments would leave the border open to infiltration by Iranian agents and extremists. (Note: Most of the 34th Peshmerga Brigade remained in Khaniqin on August 26.) There are reports Prime Minister Maliki subsequently ordered the ISF to pull back from near Khanaqin. Kurdish and Arab Sunni interlocutors in Diyala appear increasingly distrustful of Prime Minister Maliki, whom they view as pursuing a sectarian agenda. END SUMMARY.

¶3. (C) Diyala PRT team leader and several other members of the PRT met with Provincial Council Chairman Bajillan (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) and other members of the Provincial Council from various parties during the morning of August 27 to discuss staffing and other plans to enhance the council's capacity. Upon entering the room, PRToffs found Bajillan watching a special Kurdish news broadcast of the demonstration in Khanaqin. (Note: While the Kurdish broadcast gave the impression of many thousands, MNF-I sources indicate there were between 150-300 demonstrators.) Bajillan remarked that the public in Khanaqin was extremely upset with the movement of troops into "peaceful Kurdish areas" alleging that GOI forces were bypassing areas in Diyala that had active Al Qaeda cells. He mentioned the nearby area east of Hamreen Lake called Taraj, cities including Imam Waiz, and Saidiya as appropriate targets which contain Al Qaeda members and supporters. He added that Khanaqin Qada was the only Qada (Note: A Qada is similar to a county in a U.S. state. End Note.) in Diyala that Al Qaeda had not been able to control in late 2006 and the first half of 2007 when Al Qaeda seized most of Diyala Province.

¶4. (C) Bajillan accused ISF of pursuing political rather than security goals and claimed Operation Benevolent Diyala was intended to undermine opponents of the Mailiki government in advance of the upcoming provincial election. He charged that ISF had entered the Khanaqin headquarters of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and other Kurdish parties and threatened them with dire consequences if they did not depart the area.

¶ 15. (C) Bajillan charged that the ISF move toward Khanaqin was also intended to support the Badr Corps (the ruling Shiite Da'wa Party's militia) which have been historically active in Diyala. He said that Badr militia are operating under the guise of a humanitarian NGO (he could not recall the name) in the Khanaqin area. He stated that a member of the Qada council named Johar, who has ties to Iran, had sought to establish a political party for Badr in Khanaqin, but had been blocked by the Qada's Khaim Maqam (political leader) Muhammed Hassan Amin (PUK). Bajillan asserted Hassan would likely face detention himself in future.

¶ 16. (C) Bajillan said that changes in the makeup of security forces near Khanaqin as a result of Operation Benevolent Diyala would actually lessen security and heighten ethnic tensions. He told us that the Peshmerga 34th battalion had withdrawn to the Kurdish autonomous region five days ago. (Note: According to multiple sources, including MNF-I CJ3, the Peshmerga Bridge remained in Khaniqin as of August 25. End Note.) Bajillan charged that the previously multiethnic local police were being replaced by a new force established in nearby Jalola in violation of Article 140 of the Constitution, he asserted. The new police force was said to be comprised of over 800 officers who were mostly associated with the Kurawee Tribe led by a Sheik Faisal.

¶ 17. (C) Bajillan told us that the Kurawee Tribe were from southern Iraq and had been transplanted to the Khanaqin area by Saddam Hussein as part of an "Arabization" program in Kurdish areas. Bajillan stated that Faisal had led some of the Al Qaeda parades when they controlled his area (part of Taraj which contains 25 villages) in the Hamreen mountains

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and that this area still contained active Al Qaeda cells. Bajillan added that, "Even the Arabs in that area say Faisal does not represent the people there." Bajillan made the point that having the Kurawee, who took over Kurdish houses and farms, in charge of the police will substantially impede and perhaps prevent the implementation of Article 140 requirements that the Kurdish internally displaced persons be returned to that area.

¶ 18. (C) Bajillan remarked that LtGen Ali Ghedan, who is in charge of Operation Benevolent Diyala, may be a Shia, but he was a general in Saddam Hussein's regime and has retained the same Baathist ideology. He added that Kurds perceive all the generals in charge of Operation Benevolent Diyala, as well as the acting Provincial Director of Police, the governor and other security officials, to be all Shia.

¶ 19. (C) Bajillan warned that one consequence of the Peshmerga being replaced by a sectarian ISF was that the border with Iran would be opened to Iranian agents, Badr militia smugglers and other extremists. He stressed that these are major concerns of the Kurdish people.

¶ 10. (C) COMMENT: PRT judges sectarian and ethnic tensions in Diyala province to be intensifying due to Operation Benevolent Diyala. In the wake of that security operation, Prime Minister Maliki's government will have an uphill battle to win the confidence of Sunni Arab and Kurdish communities in Diyala. END COMMENT.

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